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The Fight Over 48 Soviet Agents

An intense struggle between the State Department and the intelligence agencies has wound up in President Reagan's lap. With surprising spunk, the State Department has stood up to the FBI, the CIA and Congress in defense of its diplomatic turf, and the president will have to pick a winner.

The tempest concerns "reciprocity," or tit-for-tat treatment of Soviet and American diplomats in Washington and Moscow. Boiled down to numbers, the Soviets have 120 more people stationed at their embassy in Washington than the United States has in Moscow.

This strikes the FBI as unfair. Based on the rule of thumb that 40 percent of Soviet Embassy personnel are spies, it means that the FBI has 48 more agents to keep track of than it would if the Kremlin's staff in Washington were trimmed to the size of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

The intelligence community's view of reciprocity accentuates the positive: Beefing up the Moscow embassy staff would allow it to send more of its people into the Soviet Union with diplomatic protection. It also would eliminate a number of Soviet employes in the U.S. Embassy who might be agents.

The State Department regards the demands for full reciprocity with the horror usually reserved for a cockroach at a banquet. If pursued aggressively, the diplomats fear, the demand may crush the feeble sprout of better U.S.-Soviet relations they have detected in recent months.

Some State Department officials have confided in my associate Lucette Lagnado. They are prepared to believe that the insistence on rocking the boat with demands for full reciprocity is a sly attempt by anticommunist hard-liners to sabotage any move toward more cordial relations with the Kremlin.

This conspiracy theory runs head-on into the history of the current quarrel. Ironically, the controversy began with the attempt by two liberal members of Congress—Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) and then-Sen. Walter D. Huddleston (D-Ky.)—to obtain better treatment for U.S. Embassy personnel in Moscow.

On a trip to the Soviet Union in 1983, Leahy was appalled at the hardships endured by the Americans there: the cramped, crumbling, 1950s-vintage embassy building, the squalid living quarters and the police-state restrictions on travel and other activities. Leahy figured a demand for reciprocity would force the Soviets to make life easier for our people in Moscow.

With the support of the FBI and CIA, Leahy and Huddleston last fall engineered a nonbinding, "sense of the Congress" provision in the intelligence authorization bill urging the State Department to work toward equal numbers and equal treatment of U.S. and Soviet embassy personnel.

Meanwhile, an interagency task force—on which the State Department was a minority of one—studied the situation and recommended full diplomatic parity with the Soviets. A task force memo embodying these recommendations has been on Reagan's desk since November. Secretary of State George P. Shultz has urged the president not to sign it, and so far he hasn't. But the intelligence agencies are convinced that he will.